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SUBJECT: BURMA'S NATIONAL UNITY PARTY: NIGHT OF THE LIVING IDEOLOGUES

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary: Leaders of the pro-regime National Unity Party (NUP) reveal an outlook on Burma and the world reminiscent of the bygone days of Ne Win and his "Burmese Way to Socialism" ideology, which viewed the international community, and domestic dissenters, as enemies of the state. The NUP stands firmly behind the current military regime, which has a similar view of the world but lacks any ideology or real intellect, thus allowing the party to maintain a flimsy, but national, political operation. However, we see little evidence the SPDC has identified the NUP as its vehicle for any future electoral process. A more likely vehicle is the regime's mass member organization, the USDA, which is capable of mobilizing millions of obedient "volunteers" on short notice. End Summary.

12. (C) P/E chief recently met with leaders of the National Unity Party (NUP), the pro-regime political party that in 1988 succeeded former dictator Ne Win's Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP). The senior member among the NUP leaders was U Khin Maung Gyi, a member of the party's Central Executive Committee and a former Minister of Commerce under Ne Win.

13. (C) Khin Maung Gyi claimed that his NUP party had changed its philosophical outlook over the past 16 years since the BSPP and Ne Win were ousted from power. Given Burma's transformation from a planned economy to a mixed market economy, he said, the NUP no longer advocated a purely socialist approach to governance. However, he added hastily, the NUP's major themes remained the same: "We work for the people and seek an equitable distribution of income."

14. (C) NUP leaders claim that their party has 500,000 "card carrying" official members throughout Burma and another 2.5 million "sympathizers and associate members." Khin Maung Gyi said that the party had lost about half of its membership after GOB officials, with NUP support, instituted regulations that bar civil servants from joining political parties. Furthermore, the Electoral Commission has placed a moratorium on new membership in all parties, "in order," he said sympathetically, "to preserve national stability." Nonetheless, he added, the NUP has over 300 functioning offices in Burma, "in every township, except those east of the Salween River (in ethnic minority areas of Shan State)."

15. (C) Khin Maung Gyi said that the NUP had encouraged the GOB to reconvene the National Convention and declared that his party would "absolutely" attend in order to "say what is on our minds." When pressed on the NUP's objectives, he said the NUP would seek to "bridge gaps" between political parties, but insisted that the 1993-1996 Convention had already covered the basic sections and fundamental principles for a new constitution. "We have just a few minor details to address," he said, "and the constitution will be complete."

16. (C) When queried about the role of the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi, Khin Maung Gyi was dismissive and referred to the NLD as "undercover communists." He claimed that Burma had only two truly "national" political parties (the NUP and the NLD), and the NUP was clearly "the largest and most widely represented." He claimed that the NUP had garnered half of the popular vote in 1990 elections and said the NLD no longer had a national presence. (Note: the NUP came in fourth place behind the NLD, the SNLD and the ALD and won only ten of 485 seats in Parliament. End Note) We observed that, given the GOB's closure of NLD offices and persecution of NLD leaders and members, it was irresponsible to conclude the NLD did not have a national operations. Khin Maung Gyi replied that the closure of NLD offices was "superficial" and that NLD members had ample opportunity to "be active (underground)."

17. (C) Although Khin Maung Gyi allowed that "all political parties must be at the National Convention, including the NLD," he said there was no room to be "partisan." The Convention, he said, "will decide the future of the country for the next two decades and this is not an opportunity for disagreement -- we must think of the national interest." We noted that ASSK remained under house arrest less than a quarter mile from NUP headquarters and questioned how this could constitute participation in the process. "NLD leaders are under arrest," he replied, "because they refuse to leave

home." He added that, while the NLD has a certain courage in dissenting from SPDC policies, "we, the NUP, follow the rules and stay in bounds, because these are not normal times."

18. (C) Comment: Khin Maung Kyi and his NUP colleagues were full of fire and brimstone, eerily reminiscent of the bygone days of Ne Win and his "Burmese Way to Socialism" ideology, which viewed the international community, and domestic dissenters, as enemies of the state. The NUP, ironically, appears quite comfortable under the thumb of their new masters, the SPDC military regime, which has a similar view of the world, but lacks any fundamental political ideology or intellectual approach to governance. The NUP stands firmly behind the regime and thus enjoys ample patronage and resources to maintain a flimsy, but national, network. However, we see little evidence the SPDC has identified the NUP as its vehicle for any future electoral process. A more likely vehicle is the regime's mass member organization, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), which is capable of mobilizing millions of obedient "volunteers" on short notice. End Comment.
Martinez